

Only in Alberta — Pity!

High test scores are associated with diversity and school choice.

By Claudia R. Hepburn

Alberta is Canada's reason for optimism about education. On national and international achievement tests, Alberta's students consistently score at or near the top and they achieve this, it seems, not because Alberta out-spends the other provinces (it doesn't), but because it takes a more flexible, decentralized, and customer-friendly approach to education delivery.

This approach is evident in Alberta's policies towards families with different tastes in education. Whereas many provinces, particularly those in Atlantic Canada, offer little educational choice, Alberta has cultivated a broad variety of schools and educational programs both outside the public school umbrella and beneath it.

Outside the public system, parents in that province receive financial support for the choice of either independent or home schooling. Children who attend independent schools receive approximately a third of what the government spends per pupil in the public system, while families who educate their children at home receive about a sixth.

Such a liberal approach to independent and home schooling, some would argue, should encourage parents to abandon public schools and flock to the subsidized alternatives, leaving public schools drained of support and hope. This could not be further from the truth.

In Alberta, attendance at independent schools is 25% **below** the national average (see the chart). Though home schooling has grown in popularity in Alberta, as it has in the rest of Canada, it still accounts for a tiny fraction of the population.

Public schools, it seems, have responded to competition from private schools by improving the quality and diversity of their product. As in other countries that fund public and independent schools with some fractional degree of parity, in Alberta public education has proved itself more than capable of competing successfully with its private rivals.

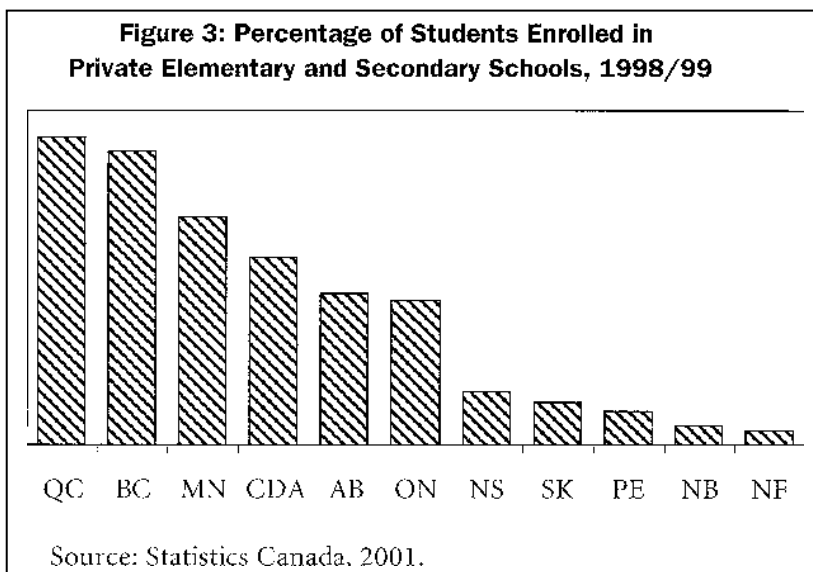
Edmonton reacted by encouraging a wide array of programs and specializations among its schools. Today, its schools are host to over 30 different educational programs, including the International Baccalaureate, bilingual programs, Christian schools, all-girls schools, and sports schools, to name a few. Edmonton Public Schools also encourages parents who want to educate their children at home by offering a variety of support programs.

Calgary followed a different model of development; however, the children of Calgary still have access to a variety of school choices, thanks to provincial support for charter schools. Though the choices offered by the Calgary board pale in comparison to Edmonton, they still seem generous in comparison to those of school boards outside Alberta.

Calgary offers six international language programs, one all-girls school, two Montessori schools, an Aboriginal culture school, four arts schools, and 17 programs for high-risk students. Calgary is also host to six charter schools, including a traditional "back-to-basics" school, a science school, an arts school, and a school for gifted students.

If other provinces took heed of Alberta's model for success, Canada could easily become a world leader in educational achievement, satisfaction, and efficiency.

(Adapted with permission from "Flexible Approach to Education Delivery Makes Alberta a Leader" in the Fraser Forum, January 2004, the magazine of the Fraser Institute.)



This is due, at least in part, to the fact that the government allows its public schools to act in some ways like private schools. Ten years ago, when the government enacted an increase to private school funding, it made other changes that encouraged the public education system to compete well.

These changes included provincial standardized testing programs and grade 12 diploma examinations, charter school legislation, and decentralized schools. The changes have made school boards accountable for their academic results, while encouraging diversity in how they get the results.

How the school boards approach this policy environment can be seen by comparing the approaches of the municipal school boards of Edmonton and Calgary.